

SOUTHEAST ASIAN RESIDENT STUDY
FOR
THE WEST SIDE CITIZEN'S ORGANIZATION AND
THE RIVERVIEW NEIGHBORHOOD CRIME WATCH
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

Submitted by Rachel Fang
14 August, 1989

CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	1
BACKGROUND.....	3
HISTORY--HMONG.....	4
HISTORY--CAMBODIAN.....	5
ISSUES AND CONCERNS.....	7
WEST SIDE CONCERNS.....	7
OBSTACLES.....	9
RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION.....	10

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Because of the increasing number of Southeast Asian residents in the West Side neighborhood of St. Paul, the West Side Citizen's Organization (WSCO) and the Riverview Neighborhood Crime Watch (RNCW) initiated a study of the different Southeast Asian groups on the West Side to determine their specific needs and concerns. This report summarizes those findings.

Goals accomplished:

- o Background information on Hmong and Cambodian peoples collected.
- o Interviews completed with Cambodian and Hmong families on the West Side and with service providers to those groups.
- o Information on WSCO, RNCW, and NHS translated into Hmong, Lao, and Cambodian and distributed on the West Side.
- o Garden plots established on the West Side and Hmong and Cambodian families involved.
- o Contacts made with community leaders.

Issues Raised Through Interviews:

1. The lack of a command of English and the need for adult English classes was the issue most often mentioned in interviews with both Cambodians and Hmong. Without English, refugees are cut off from the American community around them, as well as from jobs, health care, legal services, and many other important services.
2. Crime is a problem for families in the housing projects of Dunedin and Torre. Hmong and Cambodians report car burglaries and vandalism. They feel that their Black and Spanish neighbors resent them and suspect them in some of the incidents.
3. Most families would like to move out of public housing but it is simply too expensive for them to move. Also, landlords may be hesitant to rent to Southeast Asians because of the unfamiliarity with their culture. Southeast Asians need help with finding housing on the West Side.
4. There is concern for children in the area. More park space for kids to play in is needed and organized sports clubs, especially for Cambodians, were suggested.
5. There are police representatives who speak Hmong but the Cambodians are unfamiliar with the police and hesitate to call them

even when needed. A visitor from the police department to speak in Cambodian (or with a translator) would be helpful.

6. The Cambodian community is very divided, and there is no one service organization for them as there is with the Hmong. The Cambodians need a politically neutral community organization to assist them in receiving services they are entitled to.

Recommendations:

- o Community organizations serving Southeast Asians should have paid bilingual staff doing outreach work. This will give the organization credibility in the eyes of the community, especially if the staff is from the community it serves.

- o ESL classes in the neighborhood for adults that are affordable and accessible.

- o Assistance with finding housing, both renting and buying, would be helpful. West Side NHS has mentioned a program they hope to start to help people in the neighborhood buy houses.

- o Have community meetings with translation available in Hmong and Cambodian.

- o Have literature in Hmong, Lao, and Cambodian available to residents.

- o Provide an opportunity for neighborhood residents of different backgrounds to meet each other in an informal setting.

BACKGROUND

This report is the result of work done for the West Side Citizen's Organization and the Riverview Neighborhood Crime Watch from April to July of 1989. The purpose of this project was to determine issues of importance for Southeast Asian residents on the West Side and to introduce them to the ideas of neighborhood involvement and community organization.

This project was planned and designed by members of the West Side Citizen's Organization (WSCO), the West Side Neighborhood Housing Service (NHS), and the Riverview Neighborhood Crime Watch (RNCW). These groups are concerned that, despite the large population of Southeast Asians on the West Side, Asians have little representation in community organizations and the organizations know little about the Southeast Asian community.

The first step was to review current research on the Southeast Asian groups in Minnesota from reports at the Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project (SARS) at the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs and from the American Refugee Committee.

Next, WSCO tried to set up a reference group made up of members of the community, service providers, and staff from WSCO, NHS, and RNCW. While we were able to get several leaders in the Hmong community to come to these meetings, no representatives from Lao Family Community or the Cambodian Buddhist Society, the main service providers to the community, responded to our invitation. The reference group meeting were discontinued after a few meetings.

It was decided that the project would focus on the Hmong and Cambodian residents of the West Side as they are the groups most highly represented. There are also a few Vietnamese and Lao families in the area, but we did not concentrate on them because their numbers are limited. It was relatively easy to gain access to the Cambodian community because one of WSCO's board members is Cambodian and she was able to help arrange interviews with Cambodian families and help translate. It was more difficult to make contacts with the Hmong community, perhaps because the Hmong are a very private community or because we did not have the right contacts. However, Lao Family Community eventually did provide us with the names of leaders in the community.

The end result has been interviews with eight Cambodian individuals or families and seven Hmong families on the West Side. We also met with service providers from Lao family Community, Catholic Charities, the Women's Hmong and Lao Association, and the American Refugee Committee. These organizations are aware of WSCO's effort to integrate the Southeast Asian community into the larger community on the West Side and support that effort.

A 1987 study by the St. Paul Foundation estimated that there were 9,360 Hmong in Ramsey County and 2,460 Cambodians. The Twin Cities area has the second highest Hmong population in the United States, the largest being in California. The Southeast Asians on the West Side live predominantly in public housing projects such as Dunedin and Torre De San Miguel or in scattered-site subsidized family units, but there are some who own homes or rent from private landlords.

HISTORY--THE HMONG

The Hmong on the West Side live mostly in Dunedin Terrace, which is estimated to be 80-90% Hmong. Families interviewed lived either at Dunedin or in houses on the lower West Side. The Hmong are from the mountain area in the north of Laos and were mainly farmers living in small villages isolated from the rest of the country. The Hmong were involved in WWII in fighting against the Japanese and in the civil war that began in 1955 in Laos between the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao. In 1975 the Pathet Lao gained control of Laos and the Hmong, who had been allied with the Royal Lao government and the U.S., were targeted for reprisals including destruction of villages, family separation, deportation, and mass murder. The first Hmong families arrived in Minnesota in 1976 and the migration soon increased to an almost unmanageable number of refugees. At one time, Minnesota had the largest urban concentration of Hmong in the U.S. Over 85% of the Hmong in Minnesota settled in the Twin Cities. They came here initially because of direct sponsorship and there was also a very large second migration of families who first settled elsewhere and then moved to Minnesota. Among the first Hmong here were many leaders of large clans who encouraged their clan members to join them.

The Hmong community is organized into patrilineal clans and families. In addition, each clan belongs to a large tribe such as White, Blue or Striped Hmong, which have different dialects and different traditional dress. There are about 20 clans in Hmong society and the extended family is a subdivision of the clan. Marriages are made almost exclusively outside the clan. Hmong households tend to be large, including the husband and wife, 4 to 7 children, and often grandparents as well. The Hmong locate near the extended family and clan and are generally willing to move to be near clan or family members as the family is the most important unit in Hmong social structure. The Hmong are strongly traditional and have fairly rigid social roles for men, women, and children. Men are in authority and the clan leader is the strongest authority. Friends and acquaintances are drawn from the family group and problems are dealt with privately within the family or clan. They are characterized by early marriages and large families.

The level of education among the Hmong is generally low. Older people, especially women, are illiterate. The Hmong did not attend Laotian schools until the 1960s and even then, education was disrupted by war. Hmong males can generally speak and read Hmong and Lao, and some can also speak French or Chinese. While children generally speak good English, adults may or may not speak English well, and older people generally do not speak English at all. Hmong was not a written language until the 1950s, so many Hmong have had no experience with literacy.

Traditional Hmong culture was based on a rural subsistence-level agricultural economy. Thus, they have little experience with Western capitalism and industrialization. This makes it difficult to understand American work standards and employment practices.

The Hmong moved into low-income inner city neighborhoods for economic reasons. This has placed them in perceived competition with other ethnic groups for jobs, housing, and social services. They are visibly different from other ethnic groups and the concentration on family can set them off from other groups as well. They are prevented from meeting neighbors by language barriers, shyness, and cultural traditions. These contribute to the public perception of Hmong as unfriendly or strange and aloof. Also, one study of refugees in Ramsey County suggests that there is a tendency for Hmong to move frequently to better quarters, to avoid conflict, or to move closer to family. This "transiency" may cause the Hmong to avoid getting involved in their neighborhoods.

The Hmong have the highest welfare dependency rate of the refugee groups in Minnesota, 62% in 1987. They have greater difficulties in finding employment, adjusting to working, and keeping jobs. Because it is almost impossible to support large families with minimum wage jobs, Hmong families tend to rely on public assistance longer and to remain in public housing. There is also less stigma among the Hmong in reliance on welfare.

The Hmong have a service organization called Lao Family Community which provided legal services, employment services, counselling, advice, and provides support for the Hmong community. It serves mostly the Hmong although it receives much of the state money for all refugees.

HISTORY--THE CAMBODIANS

The Cambodians are the third largest refugee group in Minnesota. About 50% of Torre De San Miguel housing project is Cambodian. There are also Cambodian families scattered throughout the West Side. The Cambodians here are refugees from Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge leadership in Kampuchea. In 1975 Pol Pot evacuated all major cities and all people were forced to work the land. Civil servants, teachers, and intellectuals were killed as threats to the

new government. Many families were split and it is estimated that between 1975 and 1978, 1 to 3 million people (35% of the population) died by torture, execution, starvation or disease. In 1979, the Vietnamese communists overran Cambodia and installed a new government. The country continues to be torn by political conflicts and Pol Pot is still a threat.

Many Cambodians attempted to leave and began to flood the Thai border. By 1982, 700,000 had crossed the border and between 250,000 and 500,00 ended up in Thai refugee camps. Many thousands remained in Cambodia, having been denied entrance to Thailand. The immigration process from the refugee camps can take years and some are still waiting to get into refugee camps. Many families have been split by immigration policies as well as by the destruction of war.

The rate of Cambodian immigration to Minnesota began to increase in 1981 and by 1984 they were among the largest groups of immigrants to Minn. In 1984, it was estimated that two-thirds of the surviving Cambodian adults were female. Most families have members who were killed. In contrast to the Hmong, the Cambodian nuclear family is relatively independent. The lack of extended family or clan structure makes it difficult for broken families to reform or connect with other Cambodian families. Cambodian families tend to be large with an average of 4 to 5 children. Cambodian society is family oriented but the nuclear family is more common than the extended family of other Southeast Asian groups.

The Cambodians speak and read Khmer, written in script, and many Cambodians are literate. Most of the Cambodians in Minnesota came from rural areas with little preparation for a modern Western economy. Since most intellectuals from cities like Phnom Penh were targeted by Pol Pot for death, there are few Cambodians with a background of formal education. One woman interviewed pointed out that for survival, it was better to remain unschooled and uneducated and thus many Cambodians were unprepared for the educational system of the U.S. and the importance of education. Most Cambodians came here with few belongings and a large number (48% in Minn.) receive public assistance.

The Cambodian community is not easily defined. There is not the same kind of clustering together found with the Hmong. Many families have been unable to find missing members and many male leaders of the community have been killed. The traditional social structure has fallen apart. The Cambodian community includes a large number of widows with children who are coping with stress as heads of households as well as resettlement. Strong political factions abound in Cambodia and many refugees have brought their political affiliations to the various parties vying for power there with them to the U.S. These politics seem to be a divisive factor in the community. Cambodians tend to be shy, reserved, and private and reports suggest that these are factors in the lack of formation

of a strong, cohesive community organization. Reports also suggest that the Cambodian experience with the horrible atrocities committed by the Pol Pot regime mark them as different from other members of the Southeast Asian community and is also a contributing negative factor in their adjustment to their new communities.

ISSUES AND CONCERNS

There are numerous issues or problems that all refugees have to face when they resettle in a new country, as well as those specific to the different nationalities and to the areas in which they settle. A summary of general issues will be provided and then a description of the issues or problems that were mentioned in the interviews.

Earlier immigrants to the U.S. had more language and vocational skills when they arrived and thus were better able to adapt to life here, to find jobs, buy houses, etc. Later immigrants have major language and educational deficiencies. The Hmong lack literacy skills as well as having no English. Many have no formal education and many more have had their educations interrupted by war in their homelands, by escape, and by time spent in refugee camps. Most of the refugees here are from this latter group.

Many of the immigrants, and most of the more recent ones, came to the U.S. with no transferable skills to enable them to find employment here. If work is available here it is usually at or barely above the minimum wage. A family of six or seven cannot live on such low wages, especially without medical care, and so many families remain on public assistance where medical care is provided.

New immigrants often face racism and prejudice in their communities. This may have decreased over time but incidents still occur. This makes it very difficult for refugees to adjust and feel comfortable in their new homes. Religious practices and beliefs (such as the use of traditional healers and a belief in animism) are different and there are also great cultural differences. These include early marriages with many children and a complex class and caste system that dictates rigid social roles for elders, husbands, and wives.

WEST SIDE CONCERNS

The concerns of the residents on the West Side mirror the general issues and concerns of the larger refugee community. Minnesota

has a very good system of social services so some problems are not as severe as they are in other parts of the country. Also, the West Side is a relatively peaceful and welcoming community by most standards.

The need for English language skills was most often mentioned in the interviews. This is true for both the Hmong and Cambodian communities. Without English, refugees are cut off from the American community around them, as well as from jobs, health care, legal help, and many other important services. This is a serious problem, especially for older people, most of whom speak only a few words of English

Most of the family members interviewed said that they had few chances to meet their neighbors or have any outside contact with the American community. All said they would like the opportunity for such contact. The language barrier is the main obstacle to talking with neighbors.

Crime is a problem for families living in the housing projects of Dunedin and Torre de San Miguel. Hmong and Cambodian families report car burglaries and vandalism. They feel that their Black and Spanish neighbors resent them and suspect them in some incidents. In Torre especially, noise is a problem and several families reported that they feared talking to their neighbors about it. Families living in houses outside Dunedin and Torre did not report any problems with crime though one man mentioned that the garden behind his house had been vandalized.

Most families would like to move out of public housing but it is too expensive to move. Also, landlords may be hesitant to rent to Southeast Asians because of unfamiliarity with their culture. For example, by American standards a family of seven or eight people would need four or more bedrooms but Southeast Asians are used to much less space. Different cooking methods and different foods also can alienate people. Most families did not foresee moving out of public housing or buying a house in the near future.

There is concern for children in the area and there is a need for more park space or play areas. Organized sports clubs, especially for Cambodians, were suggested. There are other concerns about children as well. In many families, it is the children who have the best English skills and they often are responsible for dealing with all situations that require English. The traditional adult's authority is threatened by this necessity. Several families mentioned that kids don't obey their parents here as they did in their home countries. American customs are considered too free and children are taking advantage of this, according to some parents.

There are police representatives who speak Hmong but apparently there are none who speak Cambodian. The Cambodian families are uncomfortable with the police and are hesitant to call them. Also,

in their own country the police were often a threat rather than a source of aid and this may add to their reluctance to call for help.

There is a lot of division within the Cambodian community. This is due to a number of factors. One is that Cambodians are apparently very political. Different political factions in Kampuchea are currently struggling for power and these factions are represented here in the Cambodian community. Two Cambodians felt that if you did not have the right political beliefs or affiliations you would be unable to get help from some Cambodian organizations. There is also some feeling of resentment that the Hmong get most of the state aid for refugees because they are represented by Lao Family Services. The Cambodians do not have such a blanket organization to represent them. Unlike the Hmong, the Cambodians are from all areas of the country now called Kampuchea. Divisions within the community also result from differences in education and social customs between people from large cities like Pnomh Penh and those from the countryside.

OBSTACLES

The Hmong and Cambodians tend to be very shy and private. Both groups have a recent history of war and horror in their native countries. The Cambodians, especially, have learned not to trust their neighbors. When asked to help arrange interviews or make introductions, leaders in both communities stressed that everyone had been interviewed far too often, both in the refugees camps and here in the U.S., and they had seen no visible results. Thus, they were understandably reluctant to submit to further interviews. We were lucky to be able to get members of the community to translate a brief description of WSCO, NHS, and RNCW into Cambodian, Hmong, and Lao. This was then distributed at Torre and Dunedin and to other residences where we knew Asians to live.

Language was the biggest barrier to interviewing Southeast Asian families. In most cases a family member or friend obliged as an interpreter but it would have been helpful to have someone on staff to translate.

One service provider suggested that the Hmong don't recognize the neighborhood as an important entity in their lives. Their concern centers completely around the clan and family. Thus a community organization may have little meaning for them. However, most of the families I spoke with said they had no plans to leave the neighborhood while their children were in school. This may mean that they are beginning to develop a strong base here.

All of the Cambodian families interviewed and most of the Hmong families said they were interested in information from community

organizations if it was in their language and would perhaps attend a meeting if a translator was available.

In general, the West Side is considered a good place to live. Crime is low compared with other areas where refugees live. People living in Torre de San Miguel had the most complaints about neighbors. People living outside Torre and Dunedin had no complaints about neighbors or the neighborhood.

The schools are considered uniformly good. Most have Hmong staff and some have Cambodian staff as well. All of the children who were talked to like the schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To integrate Southeast Asians into the communities in which they live and to serve them best, it is very important that community organizations have bilingual staff on hand. When possible, the staff should be hired from the community. This will not only aid communication with the Southeast Asian residents, it will also give the organization credibility in the eyes of the refugee community. Most community organizations have little money for extra staff. A good beginning would be to pay community members a nominal amount for translation work. At a minimum, information should be made available to the community in their native languages.

ESL classes for adults seem to be the most needed service in the Southeast Asian community. They need to be free (or cheap) and easily accessible. Unfortunately, it is the elderly that need ESL classes most and they are the most difficult to teach. Classes at Torre and Dunedin would be ideal. It is hard to say, however, how many people would actually attend classes. One approach could be to coordinate up-to-date information on where English classes are currently available, have it translated, and distribute it to residents.

Assistance with finding housing outside of public housing is a needed service. There was some interest in information on buying a house in the neighborhood. Most families indicated their dissatisfaction with public housing but simply could not foresee circumstances in which they would be able to move.

The Cambodian community indicated a need for a police liaison who speaks Cambodian. While this may be difficult, it might be helpful to have a visitor from the police department speak to the community with the help of a translator.

There is a need for community meetings that are translated into the various native languages. One idea that was advanced would be

an informal community potluck at Neighborhood House where Hmong, Cambodian, Black, Spanish and White residents could have a chance to meet.

The Cambodian community appears to need a politically neutral community organization. Perhaps a beginning could be a sports club for children during the summer months. Before the Cambodian "community" is able to do anything as a unified group, it needs to resolve its internal differences. This can probably only be done from within and the essential element is time.

A network of representatives from resident's councils and other citizen's groups in the neighborhood to discuss community issues and concerns could be a good way to begin to organize the community. WSCO and RNCW are currently working on developing such a network to bring together the Westside community to form a strong and cohesive whole.

Conclusion:

There are large and growing communities of Hmong and Cambodian families on the West Side, as well as a smaller number of Vietnamese and other people from Southeast Asian countries. The Southeast Asian community on the West Side is here to stay. The refugees are dedicated to keeping their children in school and they are beginning to build a community here, with Asian churches and grocery stores, community garden plots, and other signs of a permanent community. The Southeast Asians are unfamiliar with the concept of community organization and neighborhood participation and need more information in their own languages on these topics. The larger West Side community needs a chance to meet their Southeast Asian Neighbors. The refugee community has a lot of complex problems that will take time to resolve: employment, language skills, housing. However, there is interest in getting more familiar with the surrounding community in which they live and, over time, a strong community base can be developed.